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AUTHOR	Cohen, Arthur M.
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ABSTRACT

The term general education has been employed to characterize an array of community college non-vocational programs, from Great Books courses to guidance services. General education at present differs from previous decades in terms of its emphasis on tighter curricular structure, global, gender, and ethnic studies, and the integration of knowledge. Coherence in the general education curriculum is threatened, however, when curricular decisions are made by disparate units. Though chief academic officers claim that their colleges are emphasizing general education, a statewide study conducted in Michigan showed that general education accounted for only 3 of every 10 courses offered. General Education can be envisioned in terms of "habits of thought" which cut across curricular disciplines and which prepare students for the future. To meet learners' future needs, general education should include courses which promote an understanding of the cultural and geographic relationships among people. General education should also help students to become "expert learners" who monitor and manage their own learning. General education should teach students to be expert learners. General education should be appropriate for developmental and occupational students, as well as transfer students, as business needs and technological change are dictating that the skills deficits in the U.S. workforce be remedied. Includes 11 references. (ECC)

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ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges
University of California at Los Angeles
8118 Math Sciences Building
405 Hilgard Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90024
310-825-3931

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The term general education has been used periodically to rationalize almost every non-vocational program that community colleges offer. Life adjustment, guidance services, core curriculum, basic skills training, physical education, and Great Books courses have all fallen under the rubric of general education. As an all-encompassing concept, general education yields little guidance for specific curriculum formation. If general education means course requirements that all students should fulfill, what happens in an institution where three in four students attend part-time and one in eight completes a prescribed program? If a state's universities agree that a student with an associate's degree shall be assumed to have fulfilled general education requirements, how will those requirements be imposed on the vast majority of students who will never complete a degree, never transfer to a university? And if general education is that which all people should know in order to sustain themselves as productive citizens, how does it fit into occupational curricula which are so tightly impacted that little room is left for anything else? This Digest presents an overview of general education as discussed in the Spring 1993 issue of *New Directions for Community Colleges*.

The State of General Education Today

The marketplace philosophy of education which allowed students in previous decades to select courses willy-nilly to fulfill general education requirements was challenged in reforms which took place in the 1980s--reforms which brought tighter curricular structure and emphasized global studies, gender and ethnic studies, and the integration of knowledge. At present, however, coherence in the general education curriculum is still threatened when curricular decisions are made by disparate units: academic departments, occupational divisions, articulation committees, and accrediting bodies (Gaff, 1993). Gaff recommends a second wave of reforms in general education to focus on involving students actively in their own learning, enabling faculty to match pedagogy with educational goals, and reinforcing all students' learning with activities and human contact on campus.

In a study of the current status of general education, Raisman (1993) reviewed courses offered in Michigan's 29 community colleges. With no centralized governing board, Michigan's colleges are free to determine their own programs. He found that although chief academic officers reported that their institutions were emphasizing general education, an analysis of 22,931 course sections offered in Fall 1989 did not support that conclusion (Raisman, 1993, p. 14). Over half the curriculum was in career education, with general education--mostly introductory math and composition courses--accounting for only three courses in ten. He concluded that administrators must take an active role in assessing the true status of the curriculum and, if necessary, organize reform.

General Education as Habits of Thought

General education can be envisioned in terms of "habits of thought" which cut across curricular disciplines (Eaton, 1993). Community colleges are charged with providing education for an enlightened citizenry while also accommodating the part-time, non-degree-seeking student who, today, dominates the community college population. Eaton offers two solutions. The first is to make general education requirements proportional to the number of credits taken. At minimum, students who take at least twelve units would also be required to include general education courses. The second solution is to integrate general education with liberal arts or occupational course materials so that students develop "habits of thought" to "strengthen their reasoning capacity, their awareness of social and civic relationships and responsibilities, and their attention to values and moral issues" (Eaton, 1993, p. 28).

Teaching habits of thought can include values development and clarification. Values are "inevitably espoused" in general education classes, according to Thomas (1993, p. 41). Thomas describes four methods to teach values. First, an instructor may openly assess the worth of an idea or event. Second, the instructor may express a line of thinking leading to an opinion. Third, the instructor may provide more than one alternative to a problem and explain the underlying values for each alternative. And fourth, students can be encouraged to explore their own values and express judgements. Thomas argues that general education courses that deliberately teach values are more useful than those which teach facts and concepts.

General Education To Meet Learners' Future Needs

In preparing students for the future, general education should include courses which promote an understanding of the cultural and geographic relationships among peoples. Sjoquist (1993) believes that the promotion of cultural literacy can help students respond well to change and diversity in their own lives. The problem lies in trying to fit global education into the general education curriculum, since instructors often do not have the background to teach such courses, and students often do not have the requisite reading skills.

JC 930 482

Sjoquist advocates a "diffusionist" method for teaching world civilization courses based on "topical" organization, such as studying the topic "unusual creativity" across time and cultures in a World Civilizations course.

In building for the future, students must learn to be "expert learners," to know about their strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and interests as learners; to understand how to accomplish the tasks involved in learning, such as how to read a book or take notes from a lecture; to develop a repertoire of learning strategies and study skills; and to build on their prior knowledge (Weinstein and Van Mater Stone, 1993, p. 33). In addition, Weinstein and Van Mater Stone argue that expert learners must learn to monitor their own comprehension and manage their learning. The steps include:

- creating a plan for carrying out a study activity;
- selecting the specific strategies or methods to achieve the goal;
- implementing these methods;
- monitoring and self-evaluating progress;
- modifying methods or goals if necessary; and
- conducting an overall evaluation of their methods and accomplishments.

General Education for the At-Risk Student

The goals and processes involved in becoming self-regulated learners are common to both general and developmental education. Franke (1993, p. 61) states that these two curricular areas are drawing closer to each other, as general education begins to emphasize developing thinking skills over learning specific content, and developmental education begins to recognize the feasibility of developing subject knowledge along with basic mechanical skills. To narrow the gap between developmental and general education, Franke recommends that general educators learn the cross-curricular techniques of developmental education, including writing across the curriculum, content area reading, or applied mathematics, and that developmental educators learn from general education practitioners the means of introducing higher-order thinking skills into developmental students' first courses. Crossover teaching and course pairing are two ways of strengthening the relationship between general and developmental educators.

Rendón and Frederickson (1993) suggest other ways to bring today's diverse student population into the general education mainstream. They contend that Boyer and Levine's model curriculum (1981) is particularly suited to minority and underprepared students. This model focuses on six broad cross-disciplinary categories: "our use of symbols for communication; shared membership in groups and institutions; interdependence of production and consumption; our relationship with nature; our use of time; and our shared beliefs and values" (Rendón and Fredrickson, 1993, p. 67).

Integrating General Education and Occupational Education

Business needs and technological change are dictating that skills deficits in the U.S. workforce be remedied. Jacobs (1993) predicts a "shotgun marriage" between general education and occupational education, rather than a voluntary alliance. The integration of general education and occupational education should emphasize critical thinking skills and basic skills for computing, deducing, and communicating. Also needed are the abilities to grow and change in response to new worklife situations, to advance along a career path, to update knowledge, and to acquire the skills for gathering and analyzing information and making quick decisions.

Despite widespread agreement that occupational students need general education skills to succeed in the workplace, various obstacles must be overcome to integrate general and occupational education. Carole Finley Edmonds (1993) suggests that many of the barriers result from differences in the attitudes, approaches, and orientations of occupational and liberal arts faculty. The pressure to change, along with the resistance to change within both camps, "often result in both groups feeling attacked" (p. 88). When attitudinal barriers between occupational and liberal arts faculty and administrators can be overcome, important benefits accrue to students.

Conclusion

For general education to be successful, a vision is required of what a generally educated person does in specific situations. But society is not static; culture is fluid. We will never be able to describe the person with a general education in a manner that satisfies everyone. Still, the effort is a worthy pursuit, and the educational leaders who have a vision of the generally educated person can at least ensure that the institution has goals toward which most of its curriculum is pointed.

References

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This digest was drawn from *Directing General Education Outcomes*, New Directions for Community Colleges, Number 81, edited by Neal A. Raisman; published in Spring 1993. The cited articles include: "Toward a Second Wave of Reform," by Jerry G. Gaff; "The De Facto State of General Education," by Neal A. Raisman; "General Education in the Community College: Developing Habits of Thought," by Judith S. Eaton; "Broadening Our Conception of General Education: The Self-Regulated Learner," by Claire E. Weinstein and Gretchen Van Mater Stone; "Teaching Values through General Education," by R. Murray Thomas; "Globalizing General Education: Changing World, Changing Needs," by Douglas P. Sjoquist; "General and Developmental Education: Finding Common Ground," by Thomas L. Franke; "General Education for At-Risk Students," by Laura I. Rendón and Janyth Fredrickson; "Vocational Education and General Education: New Relationship or Shotgun Marriage?" by James Jacobs; and "General Education in Occupational Programs: The Barriers Can Be Surmounted," by Carole Finley Edmonds.

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